

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1970

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The Remaking of the President (Cont.)

There was so much earthy and outrageous charm about the first installment of the Lyndon B. Johnson Show, and it was so splendidly revealing of the man, that we were incautious enough at the time to say that we couldn't wait for the next one. Now that we have seen it, we could have waited—almost indefinitely. In the first show, the former President was talking mostly about himself and while it was not quite to be believed, nobody's word was seriously called into question except his own. On Friday night, however, he was talking about the great trauma of his Administration, a war that has engaged several million troops and cost over 40,000 dead, and he was talking about it meanly, cutting up not only his critics but his own Secretary of Defense, redistributing the credit to rob Clark Clifford in favor of Dean Rusk (or Arthur Goldberg), rationalizing every move and reconstructing every event in a way best calculated to serve himself.

The result was that, while he in actual fact did much to redeem a bankrupt policy while he was still in office, by the time he was through reciting his history of it on Friday night, he had so confused the record and devalued his own credibility—or that of some of his closest associates—that you were left with the sinking sensation that we are never going to know the truth of this tragic affair. It is no longer a secret that we were not being told the truth at the time, along the way; what Mr. Johnson makes plain is that we are not even being told the truth now, months or years after the fact; somebody has to be, shall we say, dissembling, because the assorted reconstructions of events now available obviously do not jibe.

You can say that it doesn't matter, except to the historians, whether Mr. Clifford or Mr. Rusk first suggested a partial bombing pause, or whether it was really Mr. Goldberg who carried the day; whether General Westmoreland requested this or that many additional troops or whether it was General Wheeler's idea or the President's and whether it was a "recommendation" or a "plan," to be "implemented" or merely "studied." Still less does the role of Lyndon Johnson matter, except to him and the historians. The same may even be said of that whole segment of the broadcast which dealt with the March 1968 bombing halt, except for what it says about how, or how not, to run a government. You can ignore the cheap shots, against

thinking that what was happening wasn't happening. For until we know the truth of this, we are less likely to accept readily the hard lessons—that we are ill-equipped to engage in limited wars for limited aims, by our nature and by the nature of our political system and by the nature of the wars themselves; that a public misled and a Congress cleverly manipulated are poor foundations on which to build a difficult and necessarily devious strategy for the long haul; that policies which depend for their effectiveness on a conspiracy in restraint of dissent in this country won't work, or won't work for long; that the old treaties and the old commitments don't fit the new realities.

This, or some part of it, is what Lyndon Johnson could help us understand, from his vantage point of elder statesman, and while it might not be reasonable to expect him to do it even if he could, the fact is that he probably can't because he apparently does not see the same lessons that other men see in Vietnam. At any rate he chose instead to compound the original dissembling, to reassert the shopworn shibboleths, to rerun the same old reel. He still sees Ho Chi Minh as Hitler, insurgency the same thing as naked aggression, the war as fundamentally a test, not of South Vietnam's ultimate capacity to salvage its own destiny, but of American power and prestige. He disavows ever having the aim of military victory, in the sense of conquering North Vietnam, but his own definition of what would constitute a "win" is scarcely more realistic—"we were just trying to stop them at the bridge . . ."

He still thinks the Tonkin Resolution was a legitimate grant of authority from Congress to do everything he subsequently did, and never mind the, you might say, dubious naval engagement which was its genesis, or the political and military context in which it was approved.

Significantly, he now thinks, or at any rate he says, that "our troops (presumably meaning troops organized in combat units as opposed to military advisers) didn't go in until July 1965 . . ." In fact, July was when the President finally got around to acknowledging publicly the real nature of his strategy by asking for an increase from 70,000 to 120,000 in the number of combat troops in Vietnam, and warning that he might need more. As it actually happened, the first American combat units, some 3,500 strong, went ashore in March.

Perhaps, when Mr. Johnson gets around to publishing a book about all this we will at least have something more to go on, something that can be more carefully checked against the accounts of other participants in the making of Vietnam policy. In the meantime, there is to be a third installment of the Lyndon B. Johnson Show and the teaser at the end of Friday's performance indicated that he is going to talk about the tragedy in Dallas, and his assumption of the powers of the Presidency and how almost everybody also has this story wrong—and "deliberately." It sounds interesting, but the particular charm in this thing is wearing thin. This time we can wait.

Senator Fulbright and the rest of the critics "on the sidelines, kicking and crying and mouthing." Even the blatant contradictions are not important—for example, Dean Rusk's hopes for a response to a partial bombing halt, allegedly expressed to the President on March 5, 1968, and his public estimate before a Senate committee a week later that "Hanoi . . . would not accept a partial cessation of the bombing as a step towards peace in any way, shape or form."

What does matter even now, however—what is of some practical consequence for the future—is his version of how we got into the war in the first place, how the Congress was maneuvered out of any meaningful role, how the public was first lulled and then, to put it bluntly, conned into